

THOMAS MEYER-FALK IS FREE!



The Final Straw Radio - November 2023



We're sharing here a recent conversation that I had with Thomas Meyer-Falk, an anarchist who just finished a 27 year prison stint in Germany to speak about his life, his incarceration and his hopes now that he's out. Thomas was involved in a bank robbery in 1996 as a young RASH anarchist skinhead who hoped to fund above ground and underground leftist organizing and continued to be incarcerated for the threats he made upon his capture. While inside he toned it down a bit, became a jailhouse lawyer of sorts and built connections with publishing projects, support groups and a radio station on the outside.

He's now out and working at that radio station in Freiberg, RDL, and hopes to be come involved in helping immigrants navigate the legal system in Germany. You can find his blog, mostly in German, at freedomforthomas.wordpress.com. You can also find some of his writings in Fire Ant Journal.

THOMAS MEYER-FALK IS FREE!

TFSR: *Would you please introduce yourself with whatever name, preferred gender pronouns, location, or any other information about yourself that you'd like to share?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Yes, my name is Thomas Meyer-Falk. I'm from Germany. I live in Freiburg, a town in the southwest of Germany. I was born in 1971. I'm a so-called male, my gender. I'm 52 years old. I was born as a child of a teacher and a nurse, and I have two siblings. I've been really interested in politics since I was a young child. I began with a law book; it was fascinating. When I was 11 years old a teacher gave me a collection of German law as a gift, I don't know why. But in the following years, I read a lot about the law.

In the beginning, when I was a child and I thought about the theory of law, and I thought it sounded like justice. But when I became 14, 15, 16 years old, I saw the theory on the one hand and the reality on the other hand. America and Europe, there is a big ocean between. This was one point about why I became interested in politics. I was fascinated about social democrats, called in America, socialists. Social democrats, in Germany, have nothing to do with socialists. From the Social Democrats, I went to anarchism, because I'd think there's no one who should be our boss or whatever. There's no God, there's no king or no authority.

I was really confused, because a lot of people said, 'Anarchy means that you can kill, rape, or do whatever you want.' I think that's not a political view of anarchism and it has nothing to do with anarchism as a political point, way of life or thinking.

TFSR: *That's really fascinating.*

When you mentioned that you saw, when you were a teenager, discrepancies between law in theory and law in practice. Are there any examples of moments that you experienced that really brought that to light? Was it experiencing your own interactions with law enforcement? Or seeing other people?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Yes, I was interested in law enforcement, and I visited, as a guest, the trials in our little town. It was a so-called Amtsgericht, it's the local court in the United States. I never met any person who was there with a lawyer or who seems [to have] any money. They're poor people. They came to court and were convicted. In the beginning I didn't have a theory, only a feeling that it seemed unjust that poor people get punished.

Also, I read a lot of newspapers when I was a young child and I read that if you have enough money, you can buy the best lawyers. Then you have better chances not to get prosecuted, and if you get prosecuted not to get convicted. If you get convicted, and you are a rich person, you also have better chances not to go to prison. So, the connection between your financial background and your position in society may point to if you go to court and if you may get released...

TFSR: *Yeah, I know what you mean.*

Moving forward a few years, if I understand, you became involved in the skinhead movement, yeah? Which is very much focused on working class identity and were involved in as a RASH or Red and Anarchists Skinhead. I could kind of see a trajectory there, between seeing an injustice of the system around you, and also couching a lot of how that injustice operates based on the class background of the individuals and their access to wealth.

So, can you talk a little bit about what you got out of RASH? How you got into that? What it was like at the time? There are still RASH crews around, too, which is interesting.

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I grew up in a little village and first I met some punks. Maybe you will see it from a psychological view, it was a kind of protest when I cut off all my hair. It was in the '80s and '90s and I met people who were also interested in left wing politics. I don't know the situation, I only read something about it in the United States. Mostly people think if you are a skinhead and don't wear red, you must be a right-wing skinhead. That's true.

The roots from the skinheads, what I read is from the United Kingdom in Great Britain. It came, like you said, from the working class and a left-wing point of view, and not from the right wing. It was the right wing who occupied these symbols and this way of life. I never was interested in drinking as much as possible. I was more interested in politics, in theories, and to bring theories into practice. We were only a little group. I was 20, 21, or 22. Some years later I went to prison. For me, it helps me a lot to have a political homeland.

TFSR: *Did you grow up in East Germany or West Germany?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: No, I'm here from Freiburg, from the southwest of Germany,

TFSR: *I guess, seeing what in the West we sometimes call 'real existing socialism' just in the other part of the country and getting to speak with people that lived with that, as well as experiencing yourself living under capitalism, even though there were leftist statist parties. Did that also shape your understanding of left-wing politics and a rejection of bosses?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I think so. The so-called GDR, German Democratic Republic, the east of Germany, or Soviet Union. It was a kind of dictatorship, and it has nothing to do with some quite interesting and important ideas which Karl Marx had. Like I said before, in the beginning it was a feeling. I read a lot of papers when I was young boy, a child, and I also read papers from the GDR public papers, which idolized the situation in the Eastern world. It was presented as kind of Heaven on Earth, but it wasn't heaven on earth, it was a dictatorship very often.

The fundamental point is, I think, in the beginning it was a feeling. A feeling in my heart, in my stomach, that we can exist without process, without a party. The dictatorship of the money in the western world was replaced in Eastern Germany or in the Soviet Union, by a dictatorship of the party and a dictatorship of the leaders of the party. I think this has nothing to do with the association of free humans. So, there wasn't any wish to leave the country from the west to the to the east because you would come from one dictatorship to another one.

TFSR: *Yeah. People who know your name, who are listening to this, may be familiar with you as a very long-standing anarchist prisoner held in Germany for 27 years, having just been released in at the end of August of this year. And who has contributed to several journals, including an English, such as Fire Ant, and you were one of the prisoners that was supported by the June 11 Day of Solidarity with Marius Mason and all long-term anarchist prisoners. I've feel really blessed to be able to have this conversation with you.*

So, my understanding is you were convicted initially of bank robbery that was going to support political spaces where you're at or in Germany. There are other long term anarchist prisoners, such as Oso Blanco, who also were doing bank

robberies to fund leftist or liberatory infrastructure. He's still inside. But I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what the political scene was like around that time, around the mid 1990s that you were involved in, and what sort of projects that you were looking to support?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I think it's a little difficult to talk about this situation in the middle of the '90s, because I planned to support a left wing legal and illegal project. That was the idea, and it ends with the bank robbery not working well. I was kept in this bank after 14 hours.

The idea was to support left wing projects on the one hand and illegal projects on the other hand. All left-wing projects in the middle of the '90s, like now in the 21st century, have problems raising money for their important projects: to support foreigners, to support prisoners, to support poor people. The idea was to organize money for this and also for illegal projects, because I thought in the middle of the '90s, that if we wanted to live in a better world, we have to change the system, but not in a way like the people in the GDR changed their system. They were peaceful because I think the GDR system was rotten.

In 1989, I thought there was a moment in which Soviet Union discussed if they should smash these peaceful protests, not only in the GDR, but also in other Eastern Europe states. But finally, because of the rotten system, the system in the GDR in a lot of other eastern countries change peacefully, or mostly peacefully. I was sure, and I'm sure today also, that the capitalism would never accept a peaceful transformation into a society in which money or capital will be overruled. I thought that the political leaders in Germany or wherever in the western world would defend their position and defend their society with violence, using police, using the military. That's what I want to point out in the GDR. The leaders said they wouldn't defend their system with the military. It would though, I think it would be hurtful for a lot of people. I think it was also important to support illegal projects.

TFSR: *It makes sense that while the GDR was willing to allow for reunification, allow for the wall to come down. I mean, they were running razor wire at the wall for a long time attempting to shoot people who would leave East Germany, right? Like they did defend their power with weapons on a regular basis. But to assume that legal methods using the system's tools inside of either side of Germany, that the state wouldn't hold itself to the same methods of peaceful use of courts since such makes a lot of sense to me. I can understand being of that perspective.*

So, you were arrested after 14 hours inside of the bank? Did you receive much support from movement at the time of the robbery? If so, what groups publicly supported you or what sort of like strata of the political movement supported you?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: In the beginning, it was a little bit difficult, because I decided that I won't be the typical defendant, because I said my deepest opinion about the State, about the system, about the law, about judges and I used really bad words. I insulted every prosecutor, every judge. I didn't sit at the bench for the defense and say, "Oh, I was a poor child, I have any problems in my childhood." I said, "Fuck you, and when I come out, I will kill you, I will kill the judges, I will kill the prosecutor." I was full of hate. I spread this hate around and this made it difficult for people outside to support these defendants.

After one year, one and a half years, I got better connected to people outside, especially from Austria or from the United Kingdom. I don't know if they only accept my point of view, but I was happy that I got this support from these people outside. It was in the beginning of the internet, and the internet in the middle of the '90s wasn't important such like today.

The first 11 years after my arrest, I was kept in solitary confinement because of these words I spread around. It had nothing to do with diplomacy or with tactic. I thought it's important that one person, it was me, have to spread around the hate which I felt and which I thought that a lot of people outside felt too. But maybe you understand that it's difficult for people outside, if there is a prisoner who split around his deepest feelings and his hate this way makes it difficult for people outside to support him or her.

TFSR: *Yeab, that makes sense...*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: When I was arrested, I was convicted for these communications also.

TFSR: *Were the communications shared with the people outside of the court, like did the State say, "Well, look, we have to. This this person is being really angry and threatening. This is definitely a threat." Did they allow that into the media at all? Or was it all just the internal court systems digesting this and deciding where you would go?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I think penal code from United States and Germany at this point is different. We didn't have such internal courts and prisons like you

have in the United States. In Germany, the prosecutor convicted you and you must go to a regular local court or local high court. For a bank robbery and when I took hostages in this bank, for these 14 hours, I got 11 and a half years. Later, the courts added five years and three months for insulting and threatening judges, prosecutors, and whatever.

One more point, you asked about communication with people outside. Because I was kept in solitary confinement, the warden or the deputy warden, read all my incoming and outgoing mail. Sometimes I got letters from comrades outside. It was funny because maybe they had written “Fuck all cops” or “The only good cop is a dead cop.” They didn’t give me this letter, they informed me that somebody has written to me, that ‘the only good cop is a dead cop’ and for this reason, you don’t get this letter. So, they informed me why I shouldn’t get this letter. It’s very stupid. This was how they controlled the situation.

TFSR: *Yeab, “here’s the thing that we don’t want you to hear! So, we’re going to just tell you that and nothing else in the letter like about how your dog is doing or what the weather’s like.” Really intelligent.*

So, 11 and a half years for the robbery with the hostages, and five for the threats. Then how did it become 27? Was that because of conflicts inside of the prison system?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: No, I was convicted for a bank robbery for 11 and a half years and they added the so-called preventive detention because I was so angry in the first year when I was kept in the bank. Preventive detention is a law from the Nazis. It became a law in 1943. And it allows the State to keep someone in prison after finishing the regular sentence. The preventive detention is comparable with these three strikes and you’re out, except in Germany, you don’t need three strikes.

It’s different. The living conditions between a regular correction center and the preventive detention center both are prisons, but in the preventive detention center, you have bigger selves you have bigger television, you can wear your own clothes. So, until 2013 I was kept in the regular sentence and beginning in July 2013, the preventive detention period has begun.

So, I was transferred from Warsaw, it’s the prison in the north of Baden-Württemberg. Baden-Württemberg is one of the 16 states of Germany where I lived and I’m still living. I was transferred here to Freiburg in the southwest of Baden-Württemberg in the southwest of Germany, because here in Freiburg we have these preventive detention units in our local prison. So, I lived here for the next 10 years from 2013 until 2023.

It was helpful for me that I was interested in law when I was really a young child, because it helped me to fight inside the prison for other prisoners, and also for myself. It helped me a lot to finally get out of the prison, because when I was convicted in 1997, one year after the bank robbery. The law said, "If somebody gets convicted to this preventive detention, he or she must be released after 10 years." If nothing interesting happened after 10 years, this person has to be released. In 1998, the German parliament changed his law and said, "If somebody isn't released after nine years of the preventive detention, why should we release this person after 10 years? If he or she is dangerous after nine or nine and a half years, why shouldn't he/she be dangerous after 10 years?" So, they ended these 10-year limits and made it into infinite preventive detention periods.

It was quite interesting what they want to do with people who were convicted before these became law. Regularly, the constitutions in Germany, also in the United States, forbid the state to change the law for cases which are closed, it's not possibility to widen the sentence after the court has made its decision. So, the German Constitutional Court accepted the German law, the reform of the law. But in 2009, the European Court of Human Rights. It's a little bit like in the States or in North and South America, you have to American International Court...

TFSR: *The Inter-American Court of Human Rights?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Yes, and we have something like this in Europe too, the European Court of Human Rights. And in 2009, the Court declared that the German law violates constitute the European Convention of Human Rights, because it's strictly prohibited to change law for cases which are closed. In 2011, two years later, the German Constitutional Court said: it's forbidden to widen a sentence for people which are convicted in the past, but the preventive detention in the view of the German Federal Court isn't a sentence. The preventive detention (according to the point of view of the German Constitutional Court) tries to protect people outside from criminal action in the future. So, it hasn't nothing to do with repression for criminal actions with has happened in the past.

It's really a point of view from judges or high head people, because for the detainees in the preventive detention unit, it doesn't matter if you stay there for things you have done in the past, or which you may (it's only a kind of speculation) do in the future. So finally, German Constitutional Court declared in 2011, for people who were convicted before this reform in 1998, they can be

kept in the preventive detention unit longer than 10 years only if they have psychological disease. Psychological disease is determined by attitude or intuitive behavior, what they have done in the prison, or if there is a high risk that these detainees would do any high criminal actions in the future. The important point is high risk. If it's only a low risk or a middle risk, then you have to be released. And in my case three psychiatrists said in 2022 and 2023, that there are no reasons to conclude that I will do any will do any crime again. So, I don't know if it makes sense for you.

TFSR: *Yeah, that makes sense. Like, it's clear to me that the preventative detention is not a sentence for a conviction of a crime. It's the purview of the State's professionals to determine whether or not someone is going to commit something in the future is a scary idea. But it's like an unspoken foundation of a lot of how law enforcement and criminalization operate.*

We had until... I think the late 1990s, early 2000s, parole was a frequent method of denying people release after the end of their sentence inside of the United States. The parole boards would decide, and they would be made of former judges, former law enforcement, former prison guards are wardens, sometimes prosecutors, and they could deny parole to someone based on their personal opinions based on anything. But when they when they change the laws to make mandatory maximums for convictions where someone does a crime for 10 years, they are released after 10 years, unless they've done a bunch of other stuff inside the prison that would be considered to be what you'd say, 'high crimes.' They could be held in perpetuity, which is, for instance, what my friend Sean in the US prisons experiences. He keeps getting denied by parole, although he hasn't had any of those high crime instances. It's just the prison system doesn't want to let go of him. In any case, it's a frightening precedent when you're talking about putting someone in a cage.

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I think you can compare it with Minority Report. I think a lot of people know this movie or story.

TFSR: *So, you were kind enough to share with me parts of some of your published works that were combined into a translated form, your poems, and your essays, entitled 'News from Behind the Bars.' Some of the descriptions of circumstances like what we've been talking about just now of what you experienced on the inside are frighteningly similar to stories that I've heard from people inside the United States prisons. That and the idea of holding someone in solitary confinement for 10 years, I think solitary confinement is generally considered to be a human rights violation*

in a lot of parts of the world. I was under the impression that long term solitary was also considered such in Europe.

Well, in these essays, you mentioned that your background in law allowed you to also operate within the court systems and defend yourself legally and defend other prisoners. You did some of the court writings and retorts for some prisoners that you were incarcerated with? How was that? Were there resources available to people that were incarcerated to be able to legally defend themselves in the court systems? Or did you have libraries, legal libraries, that you could access? How did that work?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: No, every prison has a library. But there aren't a lot of law books. So, for this reason, some friends, and comrades outside bought me the two or three really important law books. When I heard about an important decision from high court, or local high court, I wrote to the court to ask for a copy of this decision. This was enough for me to write lawsuits for other prisoners, and for me. The common law and European law are different. I think, in United States, you also have a law book. But the case law is much more important than in Germany. In Germany, you only have the law book.

The written law is important. So, everyone who can read, a lot of people in prisons can't read, but if you have the possibility to read or somebody tells you what's written in the law book, you can defend yourself and it's not expensive. You don't have to pay any euros before you file a lawsuit. I have heard from United States that courts often want to get money before they approve a case. That's not how the German system works. If you lose a case, they send you a bill but only like \$30 roundabout or \$40. For some prisoners \$30 or \$40 is a high sum, but you don't have pay it before the judge proves your case, only after he has proved the case.

So yes, for me was helpful to that I was interested in law in when I was young, because I think that it's helped me a lot to understand how the warden and his staff are thinking, because all people who studied law have a specific point of view of the world and of the situation.

TFSR: *Yes, I had wondered if you could talk a little bit about if there was much of an opportunity while you were inside of the prison to organize around political education, prisoner unions, legal defense, or other types of means for self-defense among the prisoners, or if that culture exists, or was actually needed? Do any moments of connection like this stick out to you either initiated by other people that were in prison or by yourself?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: The first 10 years I was kept in isolation. There wasn't a possibility to meet other prisoners in person, but I was in touch with some prisoners in Germany and in Great Britain and also in the United States by sharing letters. I thought it was much easier to get an international cooperation between prisoners than establish an organization directly in the prison where I stayed.

When I came into the general population in 2007, when the solitary confinement ended, I tried to help prisoners by doing their legal work, to bring lawsuits to court or fight against the decision that they should be extradited. Foreign prisoners often must leave the country and I helped them to file lawsuits against these decisions. But I thought it was really difficult to establish a kind of organization.

In the middle and the end of the 2000's... 2005, 2008, I don't know the exact date, there was an organization called Prisoners Union. They were established in Berlin. There were some left-wing political inmates there, which started Prisoners Union, and they were struggling for prisoners' rights. The first topic was to get more money for the slavery work. In Germany, we can earn around \$200 or \$300 each month. We follow the directions of the State and do prisoner slavery work.

We have an interesting jurisdiction in Germany, because the Federal Constitutional Court declared in 1998 that if the State forces inmates to work, they must show the inmates the worth of the labor. So, this means that it is prohibited by constitutional rights, that the inmates only get some dollars. This started in Berlin to establish the prisoner's union and as far as I know now, we have chapters in all 16 states. As I told you last time, Germany is made of 16 states from Bavaria, maybe some people know Bavarian beer, or German folk music 'Um pa pa, um pa pa.'

So, we have 16 states and in all 16 states, there were some prisoner's union, there was an attempt to establish a prisoner union in Freiburg where I stayed too. There were few people outside, some activists from the FAU (Free Association Union), it's an anarcho-syndicalist labor union. There were some students, most of them were law students which try to support the little Prisoners Unions. But a few years later, most of the supporters outside left the group. There were no other members who came into the group. Years ago, these support group was underground.

I think it's difficult in German prisons. We have only around about 60,000 inmates in the whole country. I think that is much less than you have. Sometimes you have in the whole United States total population of inmates, maybe 60%, or 70% of the inmates in Germany are short term inmates, they

are inside for half a year, maybe a year, maximum two years. They have their own special problems. Because of the living conditions in our German prisons, which aren't nice but aren't really brutal, there is no motivation for the inmates to get associated strongly and to fight back. It's much more an individual decision if some inmates want to fight back. That's one point.

The other point is that there are a lot of snitches. That's also a problem. When three or four inmates try to organize something, they can be sure that one of them will go to the warden or to the staff and talk about it. Then all the inmates get isolated and maybe transferred to other prisons. It's difficult. From time to time, inmates try to bring published articles, or they try to inform the people outside of the prisons about the situation, especially Berlin, the capital city of Germany, it's well known in Germany for the cell phones. Cell phones regularly are prohibited in the prisons, but in a lot of prisons inmates get access to cell phones illegally. From Berlin there are some videos known in which inmates try to document the living conditions, but it's only I think it's only a basic level of prisoner union. It's difficult to establish a strong movement. I don't see now that there are many inmates who are willing to organize such a union.

TFSR: *Yeah, that makes sense. I can also see sometimes the bad conditions are enough to keep people controlled by the guards and the administrations in the US prisons for short term gains, just to be able to make it through a day. But what you say makes a lot of sense.*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Can I add some [more words]? I think we agree that the conditions in Germany prisons are better than in the United States and the conditions in the United States are sometimes better than maybe in Russia or in a lot of prisons in South America, China, or North Korea. If we look back into history and have a look in the Nazi camps and the concentration camps of the Nazis from 1930 through until 1945, the German Nazis murdered millions of people. There were some riots in German concentration camps, but not too many. What I want to point out is in the situation in the '30s and '40s in German concentration camps, the inmates were fighting to survive. They were facing death. There was no possibility, no opportunity to get released and everybody knew this.

I wasn't wondering why inmates today aren't willing to get organized and fight back because if I compare it with the situation in the '30s, and '40s, in Germany, people were facing death and weren't struggling too much. There were hundreds, maybe 1000's of heroes who organized riots in concentration camps, but there were less people, if you compare it with the millions and millions of

people who were murdered. I was thinking about what kind of human attitude must be present that they accept harsh and brutal living conditions, that they accept that they will be murdered in a few days or in a few weeks or a few months. I never find a conclusion. But that makes me not really wonder why the people today aren't willing to get organized and fight back.

TFSR: *I find it interesting just briefly, that people in Berlin prisons are able to get a hold of cell phones. I know in the United States, the way that it works out is in the areas generally where there's poor labor conditions for the guards, there's a lot of corruption that allows for easier transit of cell phones or other illegal devices or drugs into the prisons for the internal market within the prison. That becomes a much harder device to get a hold of in some of the Northern, Midwestern, and West Coast states where there might be more labor protection for the guards and so they're getting paid better, so they're less likely to take bribes.*

Do you have any idea about why it is that phones are able to get in? Just because it's a big city or what that dynamic looks like?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Let's talk about Berlin. Berlin is the biggest city in Germany. I really don't know the situation there and the ways smartphones came in, but I think in prisons in Berlin, you have a little bit more corruption than in the prisons like here in Brandenburg, Bavaria, or Hamburg because of the different society that exists there.

I can speak about Freiburg. You have a lot of former soldiers which became guards after their army career, and they are living in little villages around Freiburg. They are normal citizens, normal people, they have conservative attitudes, and they don't want to risk their job.

In the past, I was talking about the problem of corruptions with some officers, and they said that they won't risk their job for the few dollars or whatever they can earn to smuggle a smartphone inside the prison. Comparing it with the income they get from the State. In Germany, you must get a regular education of three years, (I think it's much more than the requirements in United States), even in the beginning of the education if they want to become a guard, they earn around \$1000 each month, just for beginning their education. So, the economic situation in Germany isn't too bad, it is not as bad as in the United States.

If you are living in an area like Freiburg or its province, it's easier for them to exist with little income than if you're living in a big city like in Berlin. In Berlin, you have to pay \$800-\$900 each month only to get a little flat. For \$800 here in Freiburg, you can get maybe two or three rooms and the bath and a

toilet. I think from a point of view from the State, it's kind of protection if they pay their guards enough money.

And the second point was...?

TFSR: *Well, and you said that there's a different culture in Berlin. That makes sense. If somebody is working as a guard in a small facility in a small conservative community where maybe there aren't a lot of jobs and it's culturally more conservative, people in a larger city might be willing to get away with more. Also, there's more money flowing around too, I'm sure.*

So, one thing that I find quite interesting about your resistance behind bars was your continued engagement with the movement on the outside through your writing, but also your engagement with comrades doing radio at RDL or Radio Dreyeckland. Could you talk about how you got involved with the radio what your engagement with that project looked like while you were inside and how it's transitioning now that you've been released?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: It's so sad. I was writing articles for more than two decades. All these articles were censored by the prison because incoming and outgoing mail in German prisons are regularly getting censored by the guards. When I was in isolation a deputy warden censored it. So, I only published articles under the control of the State. When I was transferred to Freiburg in 2013, I sent my articles to the local radio station RDL. There is a radio show called Knastfunk, it's a Prison radio and every Sunday from 9pm until 10pm for 35 years. A few days ago, we had a little party celebrating the 35 years of prison radio show.

Two or three years ago, there were a new little group inside of RDL which wanted to establish a new radio show called 'Ausbruch' which means 'breaking through' or 'breaking out.' After 35 years, for the old prison radio show members, there are still two to four members who have been organizing these shows for 35 years. I think that's a long time. They want to step back a little bit. So, they share the time on the radio station with these new groups, which consists of people who are much younger than the old crew.

The new crew tried to get in contact with me. So, I sent my articles to them for a few years. Then they said I should try to get permission to call them directly in the studio, the radio station. I tried and prison administration forbids those kinds of contact. In Germany, you have you have the right to use the phone and call people outside, but the prison administration controls which numbers you want to call. So, I went to file a lawsuit and went to court, and I

won the case. I won the case and the prison administrations had to allow me to call the RDL.

Since then, once every month, I was part of the radio show on 9pm. I have to call them at 9pm because later, the rules don't allow phone calls. In the evening they turn off the telephones. So that's the reason why I call them exactly at nine o'clock. I reported about what happened in the last four weeks in the prison, any news, and then I spoke about one topic on the radio show every month. For example, I was talking about the prison law for visitors and the reasons a prison administration can't forbid visits, another was the medical situation in the prisons. Are there any laws or judgments which could help inmates to struggle in the legal kind of way. So, in each radio show I talked about the latest news from prison.

The last three years, the Corona pandemic situation dominated every prison radio show because the living conditions weren't good. They were really bad for a lot of us. The people from the 'Breakthrough' radio show offered me the possibility to be an employee for when I got [released from] prison. The radio RDL testified (because the prison administration and the court wants to get a sheet of paper) that I can start at so-called Bundesfreiwilligendienst, a kind of social engagement. For two years the State will pay the social welfare in these periods. They also pay for the social insurance, and I get from the State around \$500, and they will pay the rent for my flat. A little flat I have to say, and I get little extra money from RDL. Every person gets these \$100 or \$150. If somebody stayed in prison for maybe 27 years, \$600 each month is huge amount of money.

So that's helped me a lot to exist, to survive, to organize a new life outside. I think it's important that someone who stayed in prison for such a long time doesn't throw away these experiences. I can understand everyone who said, after such a long time, I don't want to have anything to do with prisons, but this wouldn't be a political attitude. I think if I struggled for more than two decades against the prison system, there is a moral duty to share this experience with other people. Much more importantly to help these 1000s, 100,000s, and millions of people who are still in prison, that maybe some of them get a chance that their situation can be known by the public.

It's not only a moral duty, in my case it came from the deepest part of my heart. I want to be part of the abolish prisons movement, of the anti-prison movement. I'm sure that prisons can't be and [doesn't solve] anything. I have the experience of 27 years, I know a little bit about the lawsuits, I know something about the illegal situation. That's the reason why I'm so happy that RDL offered me this chance to be part of the radio station.

TFSR: *Yeah, that's great. I'm so glad that you're able to continue doing the work, but from the outside so that you can help other folks transition into that same thing and resist. You mentioned in your recent post *How The Wind Rustles And The Acorns Fall: A Few Days Of Freedom!* (Which is available at your blog *FreedomForThomas.Wordpress.com* as well as on *Brighton ABC's* website) about some of the things that you had to get used to and the help that you've had from comrades.*

I wonder if you would share a little bit about some of these shifts in cultural norms between when you went in and when you've come out, technological changes, and maybe some helpful things that your friends have done to help you to settle in so that this might be a good example for other people helping loved ones into a post-carceral situation?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: That's a good question. I think that's also a reason I want to be part of the movement, because for 27 years, I got a huge amount of solidarity. I think it's important to give something back. Not in capitalistic meaning, getting paid back your debt, but I think for people support inmates, it's important that the inmates after getting free, give something back.

Yes. Friends and comrades in Freiburg and in other cities in Germany, they really helped a lot. I was living in a little world, prisons are their own world which are using technologies of the 20th, sometimes 19th century. I needed a cell phone and a laptop, and they all organized so that I can start, in the first minute of my release, getting connected with the world. This was important for me because I was interested in technology before I came to prison. Maybe some people know Commodore 64, a computer from the early '80s. I knew a little bit of Basic and later about Pascal and I was really interested in technologies. Now there is 27 years between, but it wasn't too difficult for me to get updated to the level of the 21st century.

The first point is [that] it's important that people outside tried if they have the money and the possibility to organize some kind of modern technologies and stuff for people who are getting released. Second, it's important that there are people who try to answer questions of the former inmates. When I came out on 28th or 29th of August this year, I had many questions. I wasn't in a halfway house before, I came directly from the high security unit into onto the streets. So, it was a kind of cultural shock, a little bit. So, I think it's important that for these kinds of inmates that a little group of close friends, comrades, sometimes maybe family, in my case, not really family, but close friends and comrades who can stabilize person who is destabilized in an extreme way.

If you have to stay in a high security unit for ages, I had a really strict structure of my daily life. Not only I, but my body also knows if there is a door,

you have to wait before this door because it doesn't make sense to try to open the door because it's closed, and you need a guard to open the door. This little example should visualize the difficulties. I know that I can open doors by myself, but the body, the automatic and systematic organizations of how bodies function, how they are living, must learn this. So, I know I have to open a door by myself and now I learned in a few minutes and a few hours that it doesn't make sense to be waiting in front of the door and that somebody will open the door for you.

What I heard from other former inmates who were in prisons for a long time, for example, Gioc, he was in prison for 57 or 58 years. We have shared letters a few years ago before he died outside, that in the first few weeks he was waiting in front of doors. And that he doesn't close his letters, because in the prison you learn if you want to send a letter, you must bring it open to the officers and they close it for you. I think he was 80 years old. I want to illustrate some special kind of problems which former inmates has to struggle with. It's really important that there are people outside who want to be part of the way back into a normal life.

I also know some former inmates who were released five years or 10 years ago, they told me that they are struggling with problems after five or 10 years also. That they have dreamt, while they were in prison, about the paradise outside of the wall and if they get the chance to be part of the so-called Paradise of the reality of the life outside of the walls, they see, they feel, they experience that it's really complicated. Much more complicated than the daily life in prison. Daily life in prison has it's own rhythm, own regime, own structure, own system, own informal kind of law, but it's completely different from outside.

For my own situation. I can point out that regularly. I point out the differences between prisons inside and the daily life outside. What I really believe in is that if you ask someone in a friendly kind of manner, it doesn't matter if you are inside of the prison or outside of the prison, most of the time you will get a kindly friendly answer. I know outside you can ask somebody friendly, maybe he or she won't give you an answer or insults you. This also can happen in prison. But I think if you try to be honest, try to be friendly, and have the courage to ask somebody. That's what my experience is during the last four or five weeks outside and 27 years before: most of the people will help you. I think that's what I want to say to former inmates or to people who get a chance to be out, to get released. Ask people in an honest and friendly manner. You will get, in most of the situations, an honest and friendly answer.

TFSR: *Yeah. That's great. I think people that haven't been into prison, forget that, too. Sometimes.*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Yes. All right.

TFSR: *So, besides the internship with RDL, when you and I spoke earlier, you mentioned wanting to work helping migrants navigate living in Germany. You mentioned some of the writings in your book, *News From Behind the Bars* that you had helped other people with their court documents. Can you talk about this calling for you? Or this desire that you have to be involved in helping people navigate the difficult legal situations, particularly, as groups, such as the racist AfD (Alternative for Germany party) are gaining in power in Germany?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: When I was a little child, 5, 6, or 7 years ago, we were living in a house with Turkish immigrants. So, the first Turkish word I learned was 'anne.' 'Anne' is the Turkish word for mom. So, I was in touch with foreigners, or so-called foreigners from the beginning of my life. When I was 14 or 15 years old, I was part of a social network which supports migrant young people who go to school. We were helping them do their homework and taught them mathematics, German, or whatever, with their lessons. I think it was important for me, that I was in touch with foreigners, so-called foreigners, from the beginning of my life. Now for more than 50 years. I think it's important to help migrants in every situation, every time, all the time, because often they are much more vulnerable than the people who aren't migrants.

They are more vulnerable because regularly they don't have a lot of money, they have a difficult situation, the State wants to deport them to their so-called home country or whatever. If you have the possibility, you have the knowledge to help people, I think it's a moral duty to help these people.

Not only a moral duty, but it also comes from the deepest part of my heart to help people in a difficult situation. There are so many people in a difficult situation, there are not only migrants, but you also have homeless people, you have women [who sometimes have been] victims of sexual crimes, you have so many problems of the world. Nobody can solve all these problems or whatever.

I grew up with law, I was interested in law since I was 11 or 12 years old. I read a lot about law books. I know a lot about the laws, and the structure of law and in the prisons, I helped migrants to fight against the States who want to deport them into other countries. So, I thought to myself that it would be

important, not only to be part of the anti-prison movement, because the anti-prison movement has a lot of to do with my own history without my own past, but I also need something out of this bubble.

To save our environment or to save nature is also important, but for me, I'm 52 years old, it would be too difficult to learn all these details about these other kinds of stuff. I know something about the Immigrant Law, and I also get a chance to be part of a social center here in Freiburg, which helps migrants every Thursday from 2pm until 10pm. Every week for 40 to 50 weeks a year, for years now. They said that they need that they are looking for someone who is also interested to be part of this project. Because there are so many people, so many immigrants who needs help, because most of them can't pay for a regular lawyer. Your lawyer will be really expensive in the United States, like in Germany. So, I think it's the best way to get a possibility to be part of a movement outside of the anti-prison bubble and anti-prison movement is to help foreigners. Because I like foreigners, I like people and I have the possibility, and I have the attitude, and I have the skills to help them. That's the reason why I want to be part of this kind of movement here in Freiburg.

TFSR: *Yeah, that's great.*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: You mentioned the AfD right wing. They are like Donald Trump, or like Republicans in the United States. Sometimes, the AfD is much stronger. They're much more than like neo-Nazis. I think it's always important to have migrants, but in a situation like this, and an area like this, in a time when parties like [US] Republicans or AfD in Germany is rising up and tries to mistreat foreigners try to cut their human rights. I think it's a human duty to help migrants.

TFSR: *Yeah, thank you for adding that. Will you continue publishing on your blog? Or are there other methods that listeners can contact you or keep up with your thoughts and your experiences?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Yes. I try to publish articles on my own blog as I mentioned before. I love to write articles, I love to write letters. I'm always writing letters, especially to people who don't have access to the internet. Outside, there are some older people who don't have access to the internet. So, I write them letters. There are also some inmates [that] I've known some of them for 15-20 years. I'm also in touch with them and write letters to them. I love to write, I'm

sure that as long as my breathe and my heart is beating, I will write and publish. It's so important to inform people outside... I know I'm also outside.

I know that there is a sea of information outside, not only a lake, but it's also a sea of information, and it's difficult to know that I'm only less than a little drop in the sea. But if there are no drops, you won't have a sea at the end. So, I know that there are not many people who are really interested in the situation of inmates, because too many people think that it's their own their own fault that they are a prisoner.

Here in Germany, we sometimes have the discussion, especially from AfD, or from the Conservative Party, the CDU, that the living conditions in the German prisons are much too good for them that they must be worse. That must be because it doesn't feel like punishment. But I'm sure and every inmate could testify that every second, every minute in the prison, every day of the week of the year feels like a hard punishment. So, I think it's important to try my best to inform the people about the situation behind the bars.

TFSR: *So, in conversation, you've used the term abolitionism. My understanding of that term comes from the context of the continuation of the movement against chattel slavery and the legacy of white supremacy and anti-Black settler colonialism within the United States of America. Though, obviously, there's a lot more to it than all those elements and people that are continuing to work around abolitionist movements, make it as they go, it changes depending on who's participating.*

When you or other people in Germany talk about abolitionism, what values and critiques lie at the core of that idea for you?

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: It's difficult for people on the outside of prisons to talk about abolishing prisons. But I'm happy that there are so many people outside here in Germany, and not only in Germany, in Europe, people, like you mentioned in the United States, or in different countries of the world are struggling against the existence of prisons. Prisons can't be a solution for any problem. Most of the inmates are inside because of social problems, which they can't solve with strategies that don't hurt other people. I don't know but I'm sure that it's difficult to abolish prisons of a capitalist society. Because I really believe that any capitalist society, other people said socialist societies too, needs the existence of prisons for a different kind of manner, for different kinds of reasons. But I think it doesn't matter.

This doesn't matter for the abolish movement, because we have to think about a period of 50 years, 100 years, 250 years or whatever. You mentioned the abolish slavery movement, and it took a lot of years. In an official way, slavery is

still existing in the United States and in a lot of other countries too. So, I think for my own, I want to be part of this movement, I want to be a drop or a little gleaming fire of this movement. I know that there are not only inmates who are struggling to abolish prisons, I don't want to say that inmates aren't well educated, but I want to say that there are also well-educated people outside who want to too.

In 2019, there was a manifesto to abolish prisons and other kinds of institutions. Maybe 20 or 30 Professors signed this declaration: lawyers signed it, social workers signed it, some inmates, philosophers, also some psychologist. I think there is an academic discussion about the abolish prison movement and these people are part of the movement. These are the national kind of movement. I know that there are some people struggling in an international manner. Some people are part of the United Nations. These factions came from the churches who are struggling in the beginning against the death penalty. Later they started campaigning against life sentences, and now they are struggling to abolish prisons. These aren't big steps. They are only little steps. Drop by drop, little step by little step.

Like I mentioned before, the existence of prisons, the reasons why prisons are existing is really a complex issue, really complex to explain. We have economic reasons, because in some areas in Germany, the prisons are the biggest companies in the area. So many people are working there I have read about the situation in the United States, and I've learned that there are also some villages which only exist because there is a prison and hundreds of the people there are working with inmates in the prison. So, we have this economic factor.

There's also a kind of psychological factor, I think. Because it's important for the State, it's important for every institution who has power, or so-called power, to have a place in which they can send people who don't accept the living conditions in a society. There are a lot of people who want a place, it's a psychological reason too, people want somewhere for the so-called evil can be sent. These people don't understand that it's not possible to cut off the so-called evil from the mind, from the body, from the attitude. It's too easy to think that if we sent hundreds, or 1000s, or maybe millions like in America, it's too difficult to think that if we sent all these million people into the prison, that it will be changed. It doesn't change the safety of a society.

TFSR: *Yeah, I think another argument that people make too, and maybe this is because of the US context is that of surplus populations. The idea that systematically, at least in our society, there are portions of the country that power is not interested in integrating or that it can't integrate. So, higher populations of racial minorities,*

or certain classes of people tend to have interactions with law enforcement in courts and are more likely to end up behind bars because capital hasn't deemed these populations as being necessary for its functioning at this point, or because of racial ideology that's inherent in the United States. I don't know if that's a factor in Germany, if there's like a higher proportion of Roma people in prisons, for instance, or Turkish people in a way that reflects the sort of politics and values of groups like the conservative or the AfD.

I guess it doesn't need to be a question...

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: Can I kind of point out a second thing?

When I try to discuss this topic with people who aren't involved in left wing politics or aren't interested in the abolish prison movement, I often hear that they think that we are fighting for a society in which every man can do what he or she wants, that he or she can rape or kill people or whatever these typical arguments against the abolish movement. I think that's totally wrong and makes me a little bit mad. I do not fight for a movement where people can hurt each other. That's the reason why I think, to abolish prisons in a capitalist system wouldn't work because these capitalist systems need places like these to exist. But we are working for a society without prisons, and it is in the same way we are fighting for a society in which people learn not to hurt other people. So, I don't want someone who rapes children to get free and can start anew series of crimes. It really makes me mad to discuss this problem with people who always answered with this kind of prejudice.

TFSR: *No, that makes sense. I think that for me the discussions around abolitionism that take personal and community safety into mind and realize that just putting someone in a cage doesn't resolve the issues, that the issues are recreated by the society, and that the abolition of prisons and police and borders requires other methods of keeping people from harm or resolving harms when they occur and addressing them. I think those are the interesting conversations around abolitionism. For me, how do we stop those harms? What is causing people to steal from each other or to harm each other? And how can we help resolve those issues in a way that doesn't require guns and bars?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: A really important issue would be restorative justice. I think that's important. This helps people to solve problems in their community without sending them into prisons. Restorative Justice.

TFSR: *Absolutely. Well, Thomas, thank you so much for having this conversation. Was there anything that I didn't ask about that you wanted to touch on while we're on this phone call?*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I want to close our interview and I want to thank you for your interest in the situation of the inmates here in Germany, and especially of the situation of my own. I also want to thank all the people who supported me for more than 25 years, for more than two decades. I want to say that it's so important to spread around the word about the situation of inmates and maybe to get involved in a movement. Maybe not starting with the movement to abolish prisons, maybe sometimes people will start writing a letter to prisoner, to get in touch with a concrete person, and getting a feeling for their living conditions. To have empathy and compassion with the situations of inmates. It doesn't mean that we must defend what they have done in the past, but that we must find a feeling for their concrete situation. I think if we want to get a feeling, it's easier to be in touch with these people and maybe, finally, some of the people will begin to be part of the abolish movement. I want to close this interview with my hope that a lot of people will hear your show.

TFSR: *Yeah, I hope so too. Thank you so much for taking the time to have this conversation and work with me and also for speaking in a second language. Your English is quite good.*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: You are diplomatic person. Thank you very much.

TFSR: *Better than my German so. Well, thank you and I hope you have a good rest of your day.*

THOMAS MEYER-FALK: I wish you too and maybe we are getting in touch in the future again.



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